

“If the men came to summon you, arise and go with them...G-d’s wrath flared because he was going.” (22: 20,22)

The question is apparent: Hashem instructed Bilaam to go with them. Bilaam listened and joined Balak’s emissaries. Why then was Hashem so angry with Bilaam for following His orders? In his sefer Be’er Moshe, the Ozrover Rebbe, z.l., explains that when Hashem commands a person to do something, it is different than when a human asks another person to do something for him. When one person asks another to perform a function for him, his primary concern is that the activity be done, that his request be carried out. He does not really care if the person acts willingly or not. True, I would not mind if my agent is enthusiastic about what he is doing for me, but, as long as my goal is achieved, I am satisfied.

When Hashem asks man to act, the situation is different. Not only does the actual behavior matter, but the attitude one manifests during his performance is also important. Thus, when one executes Hashem’s command, he must do so in exact accordance with His Will. If Hashem’s commandment requires hislahavus, religious fervor/fiery enthusiasm, then if one performs the mitzvah without the necessary enthusiasm, it falls dismally short of its mark. The flip side of this is that when Hashem does not want us to act with enthusiasm, when we are to act in a lackadaisical manner, then enthusiasm undermines the mitzvah.

We may better appreciate this distinction with the following analogy: Two men set out on the road, each to perform a mitzvah. One is going to be marbitz Torah, disseminate Torah; the other, to earn a livelihood so that he can support his family. How should their inner emotions be manifest? The one who is on his way to teach Torah and inspire the masses walks with a happy and enthusiastic gait. His presence electrifies all those around him. The other Jew, who is compelled to leave his family in search of sustenance, who is forced to undertake a position in which he is probably not interested, surely does not proceed with equal anticipation. Now, if their attitudes were to be reversed, so that the one going into business is doing so with relish and excitement, and the one who is undertaking to teach Torah to Klal Yisrael is viewing his vocation with a lackluster or, at best, a complacent attitude, they would be derelict in the performance of their particular mitzvos. Attitude is part and parcel of the mitzvah. It has intrinsic value in the mitzvah component.

We can now understand Hashem’s displeasure with Bilaam. When Hashem told him that he could go, the meaning was clear: If they have come to call you and you have no way out – go. It should be something you are forced to do, not something you are excited about doing. Did Bilaam act in the prescribed manner? Did he heed Hashem’s directive? No! The next day, he arose early in the morning and personally saddled his donkey. Is this the way a man who is compelled to join Balak’s emissaries goes? Hashem was angry because he was going. He went as if it was his idea, not something he must do. He wanted to curse the Jews. He enjoyed every minute of this endeavor. His misplaced enthusiasm was part of his downfall.

Are we that much different? Do we focus only on certain mitzvos, while ignoring others? Do we pray fervently on those contemporary holidays to which we relate best, while simultaneously manifesting a lackluster attitude towards the festivals that Hashem has ordained? We must remember that if our intention and attitude are misplaced, the chances are that our reward will similarly be misplaced.